Exploring How Elementary School Teachers Foster Inclusion in the Classroom for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Address Bullying

By
Sabrina Puopolo

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research project addresses inclusion in the classroom for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. It also addresses the question on how a sample of elementary school teachers work towards preventing students with ASD from being bullied, and build acceptance and understanding within their classroom and school community. Research describes the various characteristics of the developmental disorder and how it can affect students within a social context. Some of the main themes and key findings associated with this topic involve: Different community-building strategies to help build acceptance of ASD in schools; observing students and their daily interactions with their peers; using a variety of resources that promote and represent differences; as well as facing the challenges of teaching students the difference between equity and equality. As a beginning teacher, I have learned some useful strategies and resources that will support and help me as well as other teachers, create an inclusive classroom environment for students with ASD.

Key Words: Autism, Inclusion, Acceptance, Bullying, Empathy
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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction: Research Context and Problem

The prevalence rate for children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Canada is approximately 1 in 154, and ASD is widespread throughout many countries around the world (Kopetz, 2012). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests that “children meeting the Autistic Disorder criteria range in numbers up to 12 per 1,000 children, worldwide” (p.197). With numbers increasing, children with ASD need special care and attention. Bill 82, also known as the Education Amendment Act, requires “all boards of education to provide special education services to all students who are in need” (Bennett, 2009, p. 3). It is a teacher’s responsibility, and the boards to make sure that students with special education needs are being looked after and have the proper support.

Most students with ASD require Independent Education Plans (IEP) and it is the teacher’s responsibility to assist children in their learning environment. While in these environments however, children with ASD have to deal with the challenges of socially interacting with their peers, and this is difficult because there is an increased number of bullying that takes place. Hong et al. (2014) reported, “Although there is scant research conducted in bullying with students with ASD, previous research has emphasized that these students tend to be victimized by bullies more than their typically developing peers” (p. 157). Roekel (2009) (as cited in Van Cleave and Davis 2006) expresses how, “In special needs children and adolescents, peer victimization has been found to be more prevalent in children with special health care needs” (p. 63). This problem has been established through existing research. Hong et al. (2014) shared a recent survey conducted which found that, “46.3% of adolescents with ASD had been victimized in contrast to the national prevalence rate of 10.6% for the typically developing
adolescent. Although the prevalence rates vary between studies, one clear conclusion is that students with ASD are at a greater risk for bullying victimization than their typically developing peers” (Hong et al., 2014, p. 157-158). She suggests that the reason why students with ASD may be at higher risk could be “explained by the core deficits of ASD: ‘social interaction’ and ‘communication skills’” (Hong et al., 2014, p.158). Students with ASD are more likely to be targets for bullying because some are known to lack social interaction skills and are not able to recognize inappropriate behaviour from others (Roekel et al., 2009).

Strickland (1997) acknowledges that students with ASD all have different characteristics and traits, however there are a few common traits that they may share. He emphasizes that, “While there are inconsistent profiles across individuals diagnosed with autism [3,4], three commonly found traits involve abnormal response to input stimuli, lack of human engagement, and the inability to generalize between environments” (Strickland, 1997, p. 1). This information highlights what we vaguely know about ASD; these are some common profiles and traits a child may have, however there is more to be discussed and to be understood. Kopetz (2012) states that, “The world seeks greater awareness and understanding of the condition's complexities” (p. 196). It is because of this uncertainty that students need to know more about how complex and how wide of a spectrum there is.

Looking specifically at how children with autism are viewed, Sinclair (2012) puts into perspective some of the negative misconceptions that parents have of their own children by reiterating what some parents fail to realize. They fail to understand that, “Autism isn't something a person has, or a ‘shell’ that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not
possible to separate the autism from the person and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with” (Sinclair, 2012, p. 1).

As Sinclair (2012) writes, people with autism do not want people to mourn them or feel sorry for them because that just causes more exclusion. Instead, he emphasizes that, “Non-autistic people see autism as a great tragedy, and parents experience continuing disappointment and grief at all stages of the child's and family's life cycle” (p. 1). The best solution for a child with autism is to feel included in and outside the classroom, and not be set aside as a differentiated group. Research suggests that labeling a child to be “abnormal,” is “often to be excluded and stigmatised as ‘other’” (Holt et al., 2012, p. 8). When you put a label on your student, that is ultimately how they will be seen in your classroom. It is crucial that “Educators must learn and implement the interventions that enable individuals with autism to best cope, thrive and excel in environments that are safe and accepting of diversity” (Kopetz, 2012, p.196).

1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of my qualitative research study is to learn how a sample of elementary teachers create opportunities for their students to understand autism, and how they foster inclusion for students with autism. The purpose is also to understand how teachers approach bullying in the classroom and ensure that everyone is treated fairly and not discriminated against because they lack certain abilities. An equitable classroom environment demonstrates acceptance of all students, especially those with ASD. I want to learn how teachers deal with bullying in the classroom, what prompts students to bully students with ASD and what steps the teacher takes to prevent this in the classroom. The purpose of my study is primarily focused on inclusion in the classroom and how teachers try to make their students with ASD feel included and accepted by their peers.
1.2 Research Questions

The main question prompting this study is: How does a sample of elementary school teachers create opportunities for their students to understand autism, and how do they foster inclusion for students with autism? Sub-questions to further guide this study include:

- Do these teachers address the topic of bullying as a component of their work teaching about autism and fostering inclusion of students with ASD?
- What outcomes do these teachers observe from their students with ASD? What outcomes do they observe from other students?
- What resources and factors support these teachers in fostering inclusion for students with ASD?
- What challenges do these teachers encounter and how do they respond to these challenges?

My goal is to raise awareness for autism and hopefully help teachers advocate for their students with ASD, and make sure that they do not continue to become victims of bullying.

1.3 Background of the Researcher

As someone who has worked closely with children with ASD, I can say that it is because of these experiences that I am in the process of becoming a teacher today. My experiences have shown me how caring and dedicated people can influence a child’s life and encourage them to be the best that they can be. There is one child in particular that I hold dear to my heart. He was diagnosed with autism at the age of 2 and since that time, I had the privilege of working alongside him while he was in childcare. Although this experience was difficult at times, it was extremely rewarding. It was my first time working with a child with ASD, and I had very little background on the signs or characteristics associated with ASD.

As I worked with this child I learned a lot about myself but most importantly, I learned from him, and even though he was non-verbal at the time, he was very bright. I saw his potential;
I saw how hard he tried to focus and concentrate, and I was able to understand him. My job was to help him interact with other children. Although he was very independent, a larger classroom setting was very beneficial for him because he would imitate other children in his classroom and begin to develop important listening skills.

Today he is one of the happiest little boys I have ever known. He is now 7 years old and has improved tremendously with his speech, as well as his gross and fine motor skills. He may have struggled to do certain tasks on his own and may have learned certain skills at a later age, however his diagnosis was not a label, he was someone who had potential of doing so much and his abilities were certainly not limited.

A quote that I recently read by Sinclair (2012) truly stood out to me; he emphasizes “It is not possible to separate the autism from the person and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with” (p.1). Thinking about changing a child with ASD is like saying the person they are is not good enough, or not normal. Some parents do feel as though they are fighting a constant battle everyday, they wish that their child was “normal.” What they fail to realize is that, taking away autism from the child would be taking away who the child is entirely. I am not a parent of a child with ASD, but I have seen what some families have to go through every day. It is challenging, and it is mentally and physically exhausting, but I know that at the end of the day their child means more to them than anything in this world. A parent needs to accept their child before anyone else can, and this is the first step in the process. Parents and teachers should work together to build this acceptance in every aspect of a child’s life.

What prompts my research is finding out how a teacher can better inform and teach his/her students about ASD so that children can understand what it is, and also accept any
classmates who are diagnosed with ASD. Some students would laugh when they witnessed unusual behavior – what was difficult was knowing that the child with ASD did not really understand why they were laughing, or that he was the one making them laugh. There were children who would find his behaviors unordinary, while there were some who intuitively understood that it is not the child’s fault and that is just simply the way he does things. They know he is different and they will not make fun of him for it. I want to discuss how teachers can find a way to make sure teasing and bullying does not happen in the classroom, and does not disturb a child’s learning.

It was my responsibility as a teacher to inform myself about what autism is and how there is a wide spectrum of children with different diagnosis’, some more severe than others. Autism does not mean that a child cannot do things or is not able to function properly, autism is not what makes a person who they are, it is just a part of that child. I think it’s important that children learn about ASD because the more you inform yourself the better prepared you will be to answer anyone’s questions. I think it’s crucial that teachers, as well as parents and peers, fully understand what autism is. It is important to understand how teachers can create inclusion in the classroom for students with autism so that they can interact with the other children, and for other children to want to interact with them as well. Which is why I want to take my study further and see how teachers observe some of the challenges they might be facing and how they are prepared to deal with those challenges.

1.4 Overview

This study will be organized into five chapters. To respond to the research questions, I will be conducting a qualitative research study by interviewing 3 teachers and learning how they create opportunities for their students to understand ASD, and how they foster inclusion for
students with ASD. The purpose is also to understand how teachers approach bullying in the classroom and ensure that everyone is treated fairly, and not discriminated against because they lack certain abilities. In Chapter 2, I will report on what research says about interactions between students with ASD with other students. I will report on how teachers foster inclusion in the classroom, including some effective practices for supporting children with ASD, and how teachers are able to teach about acceptance and understanding of ASD to their students, and address challenges of bullying. Lastly, I will discuss what other students may perceive when they have a peer with ASD. In Chapter 3, I will elaborate on research design and research methodology, as well as collecting data. In Chapter 4, I will report on my findings based on the research and the interviews I have conducted. Lastly, in Chapter 5, after reviewing my findings, I will explain how it will benefit my future teaching career, and what strategies I have learned that I could take with me, as well as raise more questions that would foster more research on the topic.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature regarding inclusion in the classroom for children with ASD. I start by reviewing ideas on understanding what ASD is and how it affects a child’s learning as well as social interactions. I also focus on the problem of bullying surrounding students with ASD and how they become targets because of their social interaction skills. I address some of the challenges teachers are dealing and how they teach their students to be accepting and understanding of peers with ASD. I review what research says about teachers and how they can make better choices in the classroom in order to adapt to their students needs. From there, I demonstrate how it is beneficial for a child with ASD to be in a group setting and why
social interaction is the key for successful learning. Finally, I explore what parent’s experiences are with their children and how their feeling of inclusion at home can be directly associated with inclusion at school. My research suggests why it is important for teachers and parents to work together to make sure the child with ASD is able to be in an environment in which there is no label or biases.

2.1 What is Autism?

Strickland (1997) defines autism as “a pervasive developmental disorder characterized by severe impairment in social, communicative, cognitive, and behavioral functioning” (Strickland, 1997, 1). Leekam (2015) defines autism primarily as a behavioural condition; she emphasizes, “The diagnostic criteria are diverse, spanning not only the social domain (nonverbal communication, social reciprocity and peer relation- ships), but also behaviours in the non-social domain (restricted, repetitive, routinized behaviour and sensory reactions)” (p.1).

Sinclair (1992) however, has a slightly different definition of autism. Sinclair was diagnosed with ASD; his definition is based off of his own personal experiences. Someone who is observing someone with ASD may have a different definition of autism than someone who is actually living with ASD. He went to a conference which spoke about autism and it was meant to be informative session on what autism really is, Sinclair (1992) expressed:

I heard professionals describing problems autistic people have, not problems autistic people are. I heard parents recognizing their children's difficulties, instead of casting themselves as victims of their children's existence. I heard professionals acknowledging their own limitations, without blaming their clients when the help they have to offer is not enough. I heard parents talking about their own frustrations and disappointments, without accusing their children of cheating them by being what they are. Above all, I heard
people discussing autism in terms of *not understanding*, rather than *not caring*. (p.3)

Misconceptions surrounding ASD are evident in Sinclair’s observations, he acknowledges that there are people who can be talking about the same topic, same diagnosis, but not really putting it into the right perspective. Sinclair (1992) demonstrates that there is always more when it comes to ASD and it cannot have just one defining definition.

Similar to all children, children with ASD learn differently and their brains work differently. A child with ASD may have a different thought process in comparison to other children. Bertrand et al., (2002) acknowledges the fact that “Every person has a learning style” (p.87). Some of these learning styles are biological, and some begin to develop through certain experiences (Bertrand et al., 2002). What someone learns, is different from how they learn. Bertrand et al., (2002) explains that, “Individual responses to sound, light, temperature, design, perception, intake, chronobiological highs and lows, mobility needs, and persistence appear to be biological; whereas sociological preferences, motivation, responsibility (conformity), the need for structure are thought to be developmental” (p.87). A classroom setting is beneficial for a student to have a more structured environment. Generally though, it is common that children with ASD can struggle when they are presented with a lot of change, particularly when it comes to their environment (Cihak et al., 2009). These changes can directly affect how students with ASD behave in a classroom.

Sinclair tells the story of how he did not speak until he was 12, and people thought he would never learn how to (Sinclair, 1992). He describes how, “No one guessed how much I understood, because I couldn't say what I knew. And no one guessed the critical thing I didn't know, the one missing connection that so much else depended on: I didn't communicate by talking, not because I was incapable of learning to use language, but because I simply didn't
know that that was what talking was for” (Sinclair, 1992, p. 5). He puts into perspective unrealistic expectations people had of him because they simply did not know or understand what he was going through, they just assumed he was incapable. Kopetz (2012) discusses how the world is seeking greater awareness on acknowledging certain characteristics, and how to handle them, because autism is such a wide spectrum and is full of complexities (p. 196).

2.2 Challenges Teachers Face

In order for students to learn about ASD, they require the assistance of a teacher to better educate them. Wilkerson (2012) describes in her study, *Assessing teacher attitude toward the inclusion of students with autism* that, “Previous research suggests that many teachers do welcome inclusion of students with autism into their classrooms; however, it is clear that many are not prepared to teach students with autism” (p. 7). She explains how, “Teachers may perceive students with autism as uneducable within an inclusive setting, which would suggest a lack of knowledge about autism in general” (Wilkerson, 2012, p. 7). If a teacher is not prepared, then her classroom environment would exhibit the lack of preparation and required support. Cassady (2011) discusses two goals for integrating students with ASD in the classroom, “The first is to honor the right of all members of a community to take full part in its day-to-day life. The second goal is to improve the quality of children’s social interaction and academic development through daily contact with typically developing peers” (p. 7). While this may be the ultimate goal, it is not always easily attainable. Cassady mentions that since students with ASD have specific social constraints, it can interfere with creating successful relationships in the classroom. Cassady (2011) highlights how some social constraints may cause negative relationships between students with ASD and their peers:

Baron-Cohen reports that individuals with autism ‘have difficulties in social
understanding owing to theory of mind problems, i.e. the ability to attribute mental states such as beliefs, feelings, and desires to oneself and others’ (as cited by Emam & Farrell, 2009, p. 408). Theory of mind includes recognizing nonverbal communication and facial expressions as well as the ability to expect certain emotions given a specific context. Incomprehension is responsible for the inability to convey appropriate messages, which is detrimental to the interactions and relationships with others (p. 413). The lack of emotional understanding typically results in the students behaving in inappropriate ways or not being sensitive to the feelings and needs of those around them. The teacher-pupil relationship then lacks shared moments that are commonly results of making jokes and relating to one another. A child with autism’s “inability to take the perspective of teachers creates a gap between them . . . As a result, teachers learn to distance themselves in the same way as the pupils do. (p. 8)

Hebron et al. (2015) identified that behavioural difficulties are a strong predictor for being bullied. He claims that “this is likely to stem from the fact that extreme behaviour of any sort singles out a child from the peer group, potentially making that child more difficult to approach, isolated and less likely to be protected by peers” (Hebron et al., 2015, p.189). In order for students to accept a child with ASD in their classroom they must first understand what ASD is and how it is affecting the child. Not knowing why a child behaves a certain way is the reason why someone would distance themselves or even bully a child with ASD, simply because they have a harder time creating friendships and interacting with others (Roekel et al., 2009).

Cassady (2011) acknowledges the difficulties teachers face when they have a student with special needs in their classroom. She mentions how, “Many teachers feel that they are not prepared to meet the needs of students with special needs. Teachers may see the child as a
burden on the classroom, a student who decreases the effectiveness they have when instructing the rest of the typically developing students” (p. 6). Similar to Cassady, other studies demonstrate that, “It has been found that pre-service teachers who have negative attitudes toward students with a disability were more likely to recommend them to a more segregated environment (Moberg, 1997). Since teacher attitude can affect student outcome, it is important to evaluate it in relation to students with ASD” (McCormick, 2011, p. 48). If a teacher has a negative attitude, then that is directly reflected on the classroom as a whole and will cause exclusion in the classroom. Social relationships among peers and adults in a school play a pivotal role for inclusion in the classroom. If teachers are not willing to change their attitude it could affect other relationships in the classroom, as Hebron et al., (2015) suggests, “Poor social relationships usually result in isolation and loneliness for the child making them feel more vulnerable” (p. 189).

2.3 Bullying in the Classroom

Studies suggest that students with ASD are at a higher risk of being bullied in the classroom. “One reason why adolescents with ASD may be at higher risk for victimization is that they have deficits in developing normal social interactions and relationships as well as deficits in understanding the behavior of others” (Roekel et al., 2009, p. 64). Other research by Hebron et al., (2015) demonstrates that:

Inappropriate comments or failure to understand a joke can single out the young person as ‘different’ leading to isolation and rejection (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). This in turn may make friendships more difficult to form and maintain. Although friendship and friendship groups are found to be protective against bullying in the broader research field, studies of young people with ASC consistently report fewer friends and/or lower quality
friendships than among their typically developing peers (e.g., Bauminger et al., 2008). (p. 186)

Hebron, Humphrey, and Oldfield conducted a study with four children who were all diagnosed with ASD, and in their study they concluded that these children were most likely targets of bullying based on the interviews they conducted and noted four main themes that seemed to be common, which included the following:

- The experience of being bullied
- Patterns of behaviour
- Relationships with adults and peers
- The role of school (p. 11)

Within these sub-themes, they noticed that when asking the students about their experience of bullying, most could define what bullying was but could not determine why a child would be a victim to bullying (Hebron et al., 2015). In terms of patterns of behaviour, it was noted that any aggressive or extreme behaviour would lead to isolation for the child and they would automatically be excluded from a peer group (Hebron et al., 2015). There was however, a positive aspect to the study when looking at student’s relationship with adults, they found that most relationships were consistent and students with ASD were treated fairly (Hebron et al., 2015). Research also shows that, “Child for whom emotional regulation is problematic, who loses control or may cry more easily than others, is likely to be perceived as an easy target by bullies” (Hebron et al., 2015, p. 13).

2.3.1 Exclusions

Schools attempt to normalize their students, however research shows that, “In schools, all young people are subject to normalisation. However, some, including those on the AS, are
rendered abnormal ‘by falling outside of expected norms of behaviour’” (Holt et al., 2012, p. 3).

Hong et al., (2014) highlights a specific case of a student in grade 4 with ASD, who is high functioning, but demonstrates deficits in his social development. The student seems disinterested in interacting with his peers, even though he is able to communicate, he doesn’t normally respond or initiate any interaction. He is usually on his own during recess and will, on occasion, whisper or hum to himself. As a result, some of his peers witness this behaviour and call him a “weirdo” (Hong et al., 2014, p.158). The student has become a victim of “indirect bullying,” which is associated with “social exclusion or relational aggression” (p. 158). In this case he is being socially excluded because of the way his peers react to his behaviours, instead of inviting him to play with them, they “might reject any attempts at social initiation by rolling their eyes, moving away, or making sarcastic remarks” (Hong et al., 2014, p. 158). Collaboration with parents is crucial in preventing bullying, but also educating the student with ASD what bullying is and having them recognize what disrespectful behaviour looks like (Hong et al., 2014).

2.4 A Parent’s Perspective on ASD

Hebron et al., (2015) suggests (as cited by Locke et al., 2010) that children’s perspectives or tolerance changes with age, and she demonstrates this with a parent’s observation as she is dropping of her child at school:

When I drop her off in the morning […] she will go over and stand next to her friends and quite often I will see them sigh and turn away as if saying ‘oh Georgina is here’, and they will start talking amongst themselves and ignoring her. Although this cannot be confirmed as shunning, it reflects how older children may become less tolerant over time, especially as social groupings become more complex and important. (p. 188)

As children get older their perspectives change and they acknowledge what seems to be
unusual behaviour, whereas younger children are not able to recognize it as much.

Learning about your child’s diagnosis as a parent is not easy. Blackledge (2004) claims that, “The parents of autistic children experience high levels of chronic stress” (p. 1). With that stress a lot of parents have feelings of guilt, and feel as if it is their fault their child has this condition, and they tend to lash out at their partners, causing a very hostile and negative environment for a child with ASD (Blackledge, 2004). Parents go through tremendous amount of stress, and at times need to cope with and talk about any emotional struggles they may be facing in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Blackledge, 2004). Research shows that, “Acceptance presents itself as an especially relevant alternative approach, particularly because many of these children’s problems are unlikely to change, at least quickly” (Blackledge, 2004, p. 2). Therapy can assist with coming to terms with your child’s diagnosis. A key goal of the Autism Awareness Care and Training Centre (AACT) is for children with autism “to function more effectively in society” (Kopetz, 2012, p. 198). In order for children to do this they have to be in a positive home environment where their family is willing to accept them for who they are.

Sinclair (2012) in his article Don’t Mourn for Us, discusses the grief that parents feel when they find out their child is diagnosed with ASD. He concludes that, “it is grief over the loss of the normal child the parents had hoped and expected to have. Parents’ attitudes and expectations, and the discrepancies between what parents expect of children at a particular age and their own child’s actual development, cause more stress and anguish than the practical complexities of life with an autistic person” (p. 1). He believes that “when parent’s say ‘I wish my child did not have autism’ what they’re really saying is, ‘I wish the autistic child I have did not exist, and I had a different (non-autistic) child instead” (p.1). When parents await the arrival of their child they are hoping that they arrive just like them, as someone they can relate to or
what they would normally expect (Sinclair, 2012).

Sinclair (2012) identifies the main reason why parents share grief over the birth of their autistic child, and he wants to make it clear that it is not autism that is causing the grief but the expectations of not having a specific child that the parents expected to have. Parents think that they are at a loss, when really their child is right in front of them and needs to be valued for who he/she is and not seen an expectation that was not fulfilled (Sinclair, 2012). Sinclair raises an important question; if parents are still grieving over the loss of an expectation they had, then how can a child with autism have the support that they need when there are such negative thoughts going on in that child’s household? (Sinclair, 2012). The reality is that children with ASD need to be valued for who they are and not for what they were supposedly meant to be.

2.5 Inclusion

McCormick (2011) suggests that “inclusion is an educational practice based on a notion of social justice that advocates access to equal educational opportunities for all students regardless of the presence of a disability” (p.80). Many factors can play a role in the success of students with ASD in inclusive settings, such as; collaboration of all individuals involved in meeting the needs of the student (Sharma et al., 2006; White et al., 2007), curricular adaptations (White et al., 2007) and the use of behavior management strategies (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001; White et al., 2007) (McCormick, 2011). Wilkerson (2012) has a similar definition for “Inclusion,” she states that, “Inclusion is a term used in educational reform that states all students with and without disabilities must be taught together within regular classrooms in their neighbourhood school” (p. 5). The reason why students with or without ASD should be taught together is to create that sense of inclusivity in a classroom setting. According to Holt et al., (2012) (as cited by Olssen 2010: 70), “Schools are a: —central institutional means of
normalization” (p. 6). Holt et al., (2012) is expressing that having students together in a classroom is meant to normalize everyone, and prevent exclusion students who may be different. Everyone is in the same learning environment because they are all there for the same purpose: to learn.

2.5.1 Effective inclusion strategies

According to the National Association of Special Education Teachers (2007), there are four principles of effective inclusion: the first is, “Effective inclusion improves the educational system for all students by placing them together in general education classrooms-regardless of their learning ability, race, linguistic ability, economic status, gender, learning style, ethnicity, cultural background, religion, family structure, and sexual orientation” (NASET, p. 2). The second involves being sensitive to accepting other students and their differences; not necessarily giving them accountability of what they are able to do but value each other’s differences and know that they are all capable of learning (NASET, 2007). The third effective strategy of inclusion is based on how teachers have the ability to change their attitudes and are able to accommodate individual students, by being flexible, and be motivated to constantly self-improve (NASET, 2007). Lastly, the fourth strategy for effective inclusion involves a whole group in a school community; by collaborating with other professionals, students and families, there is guidance and support that will benefit each student and their needs (NASET, 2007).

The positive outcomes that can come from inclusion in the classroom has been demonstrated through research. Making a student with ASD feel included can benefit their future. Positive classroom environments share a common characteristic: that levels of achievement can increase tremendously. “One of the components of successful of inclusion is the degree to which the student with a disability feels a part of the general education classroom. The
feeling of belonging positively affects the students self-image and self-esteem, motivation to achieve, speed of adjustment to the larger classroom and new demands, general behavior, and general level of achievement” (NASET, p. 4).

According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007), in their resource document, *Effective Educational Practices for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders*, some effective strategies that have been found to improve inclusion surrounding students with ASD involves peer assistance. “Peers can take on the roles of being supportive buddies during recess and lunch, in the library and gym, at the computer, and during cooperative work periods for specific subjects” (OME, 2007, p. 90). The “buddy system” is used to encourage peers to help students with ASD interact successfully with others in a school environment (OME, 2007). “While the student with ASD may benefit from both formal and informal interactions with classmates and other students in the school, others will also benefit from their association with the student with ASD by developing an understanding and appreciation of human difference” (p. 90). The document addresses that most students are curious when it comes to the differences they see in their classmates, so this interaction creates a level of awareness about ASD (OME, 2007). This type of interaction is beneficial because students are beginning to communicate and understand certain strengths and abilities their peers have, “with understanding comes acceptance” (OME, 2007, p. 91).

Other strategies found to be beneficial include carefully designed lessons that educate students on what ASD is and how it can affect their peers. A school committee from the PEI Department of Education created a project which included effective teaching strategies for students with ASD as well as all students. The resource is called, *Educating Children about Autism in an Inclusive Classroom*, and includes many different lesson designs for grades K-12
that can be used in the classroom. Timmons et al., (2005) created the project with one goal in mind: to create an inclusive classroom environment. Timmons et al., (2005) states that, “Inclusive environments can provide opportunities for children with autism to increase their social interactions and in turn improve their social skills. Interacting with peers gives students with autism a chance to practice communication skills, develop friendships, and see how peers behave in day to day situations” (p. 8). They discuss the benefits of having a peer with autism in the classroom, “When peers of children with autism are educated about autism, and are given an opportunity to act as peer tutors/buddies, they learn acceptance and empathy, act as role models, and become more aware of individual strengths and weaknesses (Wagner, 1999)” (p. 8).

According to Prater et al., (2006) one way teachers create an accepting classroom environment is through literature. For primary students, picture books are generally the most beneficial resources for children to learn about differences. Prater et al., (2006) explains:

Experiences with books allow readers to look within themselves to understand feelings, relationships, and experiences at a deeper level and also to bond with characters, even though they may be separated by space, time, culture, language, or ability. When readers reflect on similarities between themselves and the characters in the book, they learn to accept characters who may learn differently than they do. (p. 20)

Parent/Teacher collaboration is crucial when teaching peers about ASD. Timmons et al., (2005) expresses the importance of parental involvement when teaching about this specific subject. It is important for teachers to talk to parents and explain the reason for the lessons, as well as to get some more information on the individual child, and possibly helpful strategies or techniques on how peers can better interact with the student (Timmons et al., 2005). These lessons are aiming to raise awareness about diversity, and how it is important to respect
similarities as well as differences, while also providing peers with specific ideas about how they
can get to know the student with autism, how autism affects his/her day, as well as understand
how they can help the student throughout the day (Timmons et al., 2005).

2.6 Conclusion

The following research demonstrates that children diagnosed with ASD do face the
problem of exclusion, and can be victims of bullying. Some behaviours that students with ASD
demonstrate can change a peer’s perspective and allow them to think that the student with ASD
is categorized as “abnormal.” What research also suggests is that inclusion can be a positive
change for these students, and can provide them with higher self-esteem and support that they
need in their education and with their social interactions. It is important for students to learn
about ASD and for teachers to educate them, as well as themselves, so that they can be prepared
to adapt their classrooms accordingly. There are positive ways to incorporate inclusion in the
classroom, but also ways that teachers can inhibit inclusion in the classroom based on their
attitudes. If a teacher is not prepared or has a negative view when teaching a child with ASD,
studies have indicated that this can change the classroom’s attitude towards a specific student,
and can isolate a student even more. My study aims to demonstrate why it is important that
teachers and peers learn to accept students with ASD, by understanding and learning about the
overall spectrum, but also indicate how all of these individuals are able to influence a child’s life.
This can ensure that students with ASD are in a positive and safe learning environment.

CHAPTER THREE – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I describe my research methodology. I begin by identifying some of the
important aspects of data collection, it’s general approach, the procedures, as well as proper
methods to conduct structured interviews. I elaborate on participant sampling and recruitment, as well as why I chose specific participants for this research study. I explain data analysis procedures and review some of the ethical considerations relevant to my study. I then identify some of the strengths and limitations to the methodology. Finally, I conclude with some of the key methodological decisions which will support my research as well as my questions, further developing my study.

3.1 Research Procedures

This study will be conducted using a qualitative research approach involving a literature review and semi structured interviews with teachers. The value of qualitative research is that it is “primarily concerned understanding human beings experiences in a humanistic, interpretive approach” (Jackson et al, 2007, p.21). The purpose of conducting this study is to understand a teacher’s point of view, or interpretation of my topic –specifically inclusion in the classroom for children with ASD. This is a suitable approach for my study because it allows me to discover more about my topic as well as “to discover new or different ways of understanding the changing nature of lived social realities” (Jackson et al, 2007, p. 21). I want to know what types of experiences these teachers have had and how these experiences shape social realities, predominantly the realities of students with ASD. The importance of qualitative methodologies is to also understand certain problems or issues that are worth investigating and how researchers can explore that problem further, as well as develop the proper data analysis to assist in understanding and linking that problem with what other researchers have said (Jackson et al, 2007).

Once we understand there is a problem, we can begin to further our research on that problem. Qualitative data in this case is a more suitable approach than quantitative data; Thorne
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(2015) distinguishes the difference between the two. Quantitative researchers use scientific methods to discover research and have a better understanding of the problem (Thorne, 2015). While qualitative can have some of the same approaches it aims to understand the subjective experience a person has, and it is mainly concerned on learning how people think and feel about the circumstances they are in (Thorne, 2015). My study is based on children with ASD and how teachers can help support them if they are not feeling included in the classroom. If a child is being bullied, I want to know what subjective experiences these teachers have had in understanding why these students are targeted and what they can do, or have done in the past to prevent this from happening.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection used in this study is the semi-structured interview protocol. According to Rabionet (2011) conducting a qualitative interview allows the researcher to understand how people give meaning to their experiences. “Learning to conduct semi-structure interviews requires the following six stages: (a) selecting the type of interview; (b) establishing ethical guidelines, (c) crafting the interview protocol; (d) conducting and recording the interview; (e) crafting the interview protocol; and (f) reporting the findings” (p. 563). It is beneficial to use a semi-structured interview protocol specifically for my topic because I am interested in asking specific questions that will enhance the research for my topic. When conducting an un-structured interview, you are at risk of not obtaining many of the answers you are looking for or related specifically to your topic. Whereas with a semi-structured interview you know which questions you want to ask and the topic you wish to cover; you are hoping to hear some personal stories if the interviewee is willing to share, as well as inquire any additional questions when appropriate throughout the interview (Rabionet, 2011).
When establishing ethical guidelines, it is important to be mindful of ethical and moral issues that the interviewee may be sensitive to. It is always important to consult with the interviewee and discuss, “purpose, consequences, consent, identity, relationships, confidentiality and protection” (pg. 564) as they are an essential part in having a solid sense of trust with the person early in the process. The third stage is crafting the interview protocol, which has two important components, “(a) how do you (meaning the interviewer) introduce yourself to the person being interviewed and (b) what are the questions to be asked” (p. 564). The first is important because you want to build a strong start to your interview and have a good rapport with the interviewee. The second is to be mindful of the questions you have in order to get a good grasp of the subject matter. The next step is conducting and recording the interview itself, Rabionet (2011) explains, it is important to take notes, and to make sure the quality of your electronic device(s) that you are using are optimal, so you can obtain the best results to consult and reflect back on afterwards when it comes time to transcribe and analyze the data. Then, when it comes time to report your findings it is important that you gather all the knowledge and be aware of the consequences by being vigilant when sharing the data. The person who is sharing this information has trusted you, and it is your job to present it as authentically as you possibly can (Rabionet, 2011).

3.3 Participants

Here I review the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment and the range of possible teachers to interview for my research study. The sample criteria I chose is what I believe each participant should have in order for my research to progress, and gain a better understanding of the subject matter.
3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

The following criteria will be applied to teacher participants:

1. Teachers will have at least 5 years of experience or more working in a classroom with a child with ASD.
2. Teachers have worked one-on-one with a child with ASD.
3. Teachers must have a background in Special Education.
4. Teachers teaching mainly primary/junior grades.
5. Teachers who have worked both independently with a student with ASD as well as in a classroom setting.

The reason I wish to have a teacher with a minimum of 5 years experience is to hopefully gain an understanding of their experiences over time and the various demographics they have had in the classroom. It is important that the teachers I interview have worked independently with a child with ASD, as well as in a larger classroom setting, so that I can identify some of the differences the teachers have seen with children being in a larger or smaller classroom and how this might affect inclusion in the classroom. It is crucial that teachers have some sort of background in Special Education, because this tells me that they understand child development and can provide more knowledge and possible strategies they would use in the classroom to support a child with ASD. Finally, it is important that teachers are teaching either a primary or junior grade because my research is based on younger children in their early stages of development, and how their early peer interactions will affect any future interactions they may have.

3.3.2 Recruitment

To recruit participants, I will be attending professional development conferences, hosted
by school boards. I will contact teacher associations and school boards and provide them with an overview of my research study. I will provide them with my research topic as well as my participant criteria so that they know what type of candidates I am looking for. If they wish, they can share my criteria amongst their colleagues so that they can find teachers that they believe may fulfill the criteria.

Finding participants for recruitment needs to be done carefully and it is important to distinguish between convenient sampling and purposeful sampling. Marshall (1996) explains why studying a random sample of people may not be the most effective way to collect data. He states, “studying a random sample provides the best opportunity to generalize the results to the population but is not the most effective way of developing an understanding of complex issues” (p. 523). He explains that there are three types of sampling; convenience sampling, theoretical sampling and judgment sampling (also known as purposeful sampling) (Marshall, 1996). He describes convenience sampling as the least effective because its credibility and poor quality may not always result in the best data; it is also very easily accessible and does not require much effort (Marshall, 1996). With theoretical sampling he explains, samples are usually “theory driven to a greater or lesser extent. Theoretical sampling necessitates building interpretative theories from the emerging data and selecting a new sample to examine and elaborate on this theory” (p. 523).

Finally, Marshall (1996) believes a purposeful sample is one of the most common techniques to use. It involves the researcher using the most useful sample (in this case person), to answer the research questions. The person they are interviewing has practical knowledge on the subject area and can contribute the most to the research study (Marshall, 1996). The recruitment strategy I will use for my research study will mostly be purposeful sampling. Based on my
sampling criteria, I already have an idea of what candidates I’m looking for, and believe they will have the most practical knowledge pertaining to my research topic.

### 3.3.3 Participant bios

All three participants are professionals in the field of Education, teaching in various areas in Toronto. All three participants are elementary school teachers, with at least 5 years experience working in a classroom with students with ASD. They have each had experience working in a larger classroom setting as well as in smaller classrooms. The participants will remain anonymous through pseudonyms.

**David**

David currently teaches Grades 7 and 8, as well as the boys leadership academy. He is in his twenty-fifth year of teaching, and has had experience with students with special needs, as well as students with ASD. He’s been teaching junior to intermediate grades for the past couple years, but prior to that taught Grades 1 through 6.

**Karen**

Karen’s currently the Methods and Resource Teacher at her school, also known as a MART. She looks at the specific needs of students, and makes sure they are being serviced properly. She is currently in her twenty-sixth year of teaching. Karen teaches Grade 6, 7 and 8 Math and Language, for HSP students, including learning disabilities, autism, ADHD, ODD. Prior to being the schools MART, she was an ESL teacher, and has experience teaching primary grades; she taught Kindergarten, as well as Grade’s 1 and 2 for 15 years.

**Candace**

Candace is a community class teacher, specifically for students with ASD. She teaches Grade 2 and 3, working on various parts of the curriculum, as well as life skills, behaviour,
communication, based on the needs of her students. Prior to being a community class teacher, she taught kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 6. She is currently in her eighth year of teaching. The school Candace works at is a performance plus school, which means based on the socio-economic makeup of the community, the school receives more funding from the government.

3.4 Data Analysis

In this section I will review how I am going to analyse my data. Thorne (2015) discusses comparing data from one person to another, and constantly doing this until you find similarities or differences, and taking those results and coming up with how they are related to each other and why (Thorne, 2015). She explains that, “by comparing the accounts of 2 different people who had a similar experience, a researcher might pose analytical questions like: why is this different from that? and how are these 2 related?” (p.69). This comparative process will allow me to analyze my data and make connections with the other data I have collected. Looking at the research question itself, the data analysis process will help in developing and addressing the research question, as well as help modify some of the questions during the interview process (DiCicco & Crabtree, 2006).

Thorne (2015) also talks about phenomenological approaches to data analysis and explains that not all methods of analysis are centered towards finding patterns or common traits in data, but also “to discover some of the underlying structure or essence of that experience through the intensive study of individual cases” (p. 69). Campbell (2014) also emphasizes the importance of finding common themes through open-ended data. By using this method to analyze data it can help the researcher look at the data in depth and truly understand and reflect on different experiences (Thorne, 2015). Both Thorne (2015) and Campbell (2014) illustrate the importance of finding common patterns and themes, but Thorne (2015) emphasizes that some of
these themes can vary between different cases.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

It is important that all participants feel comfortable while I am conducting the interview. According to Fisher (2012) “Participation in a qualitative study can be seen as a dimension of the civil and human right to freedom of expression” (p. 2). It is their choice whether they wish to participate or not and I will make sure that they are aware that their identities will remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms. No connections will be made to their school or students in particular. The interview will be conducted outside of school premises, and participants can decide on a suitable time to meet.

There are no known risks involved with participation. Participants will be notified that they are free to withdraw their participation at any time. They will also be notified that they have the right to choose to not answer any question. Participants will also be able to review any responses they have given and withdraw any statements before the data analysis begins. I will let my participants know that any data, or audio recording, will be stored safely on my computer with a locked password, and will be deleted after a period of 5 years. Before beginning the process, I will ask participants to sign a letter of consent (see Appendix A), giving me their consent to be interviewed as well as audio-recorded. As Fisher (2012) explains, “informed consent, which is regarded as central in providing protection for the rights and welfare of the individual, is a key precondition incorporated in a range of international guidelines” (p. 6). This letter will provide them with all the information they need regarding my research topic, the duration of the interview, as well as address any ethical implications. Fisher states that if a person is volunteering to be apart of your research study they are essentially accommodating the person conducting the study and they are open to expressing civil and human rights through
opinions and seeking social justice (Fisher, 2012).

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Some of the limitations to the methodology is the fact that, for this particular study, I am limited to only 3 participants. Another factor that affects the process is that I am only able to interview teachers, and while this is beneficial, it would have also been helpful to interview psychologists or other specialists that have a degree in Special Education or Child Development, to seek a different opinion on my research topic. According to Carr (1994) another limitation is that “research approaches require a sample to be identified which is representative of a larger population of people” (p. 717). Although I have 3 participants who are teachers, I am limited to the number of people I can interview therefore I cannot generalize the experience of these teachers to most teachers. Another factor is that finding participants is “time-consuming” (p. 717). I am required to find these teachers and make sure they all fit the sampling criteria I have created.

One of the strengths of methodology is the fact that it is a “holistic approach” (Carr, 1994, p. 718). Carr (1994) explains that you gain a deeper understanding on the topic itself, and while conducting the study you may have questions that may come up that you had not originally planned on asking. Another strength has to do with validity, and the fact that researchers are interviewing participants who are representative of the topic itself” (p. 719). Which means they are experts on the topic and they provide much insight because they are “in their natural setting and encounter fewer controlling factors” (p. 719). It is beneficial to have a group of educated teachers and learn about their views and perspectives as opposed to the views of a random survey conducted. Teachers can make meaning from their lived experiences and offer a subjective insightful approach to the research topic.
3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I explained researched methodology. I began by stating why it is important to conduct qualitative research and why this particular type of research would benefit my study. Then I discussed the instruments of data collection; the semi-structured protocol. Specifically, why it is the most valuable form of data collection in respect to a non-structured interview. I identified the participants of the study, listing the sampling criteria, which required primary teachers to have a special education background, and at least 5 years of experience or more working both in a classroom setting and one-on-one with a child with ASD. I described how I would recruit my participants and use purposeful sampling to conduct my research. Then I described how I would analyze the data, and how to look at data both individually, as well as comparatively, to see if there are any common patterns. I addressed ethical issues that include a letter of consent to all participants, the right to withdraw from participation from the study at any time, as well as the confidentiality of the participant and protection of the data itself. Finally, I discussed some of the methodological limitations of the study as well as the strengths. Some limitations include the number of participants that I can interview and the fact that participants can only be teachers. Some strengths I highlighted were focused primarily on the learning experience I will gain from interviewing a teacher instead of simply conducting a survey, as well as giving teachers an opportunity to voice their opinions and reflect on their practices. Next, in chapter 4, I report on the findings of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR – FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I will present some of the key findings based on the data I have collected
from three interviews conducted with Ontario elementary school teachers. These are educators who have knowledge and understanding on how to foster inclusion in the classroom for students with ASD. The purpose of this research is to see specifically, how teachers create opportunities for their students to understand ASD, and how they approach bullying in the classroom, so that they can foster an inclusive classroom environment for all students. With these strategies I hope to inform other teachers on how they can create a more inclusive environment for students with ASD and perhaps, where applicable, other students with special needs.

4.0.1 Themes and Key Findings

The teacher participants identified their beliefs, own personal experiences as well as strategies they have used in classrooms to foster an inclusive environment for students with ASD. Their responses expressed four main themes and key findings, as well as sub-themes. The main themes are as follows:

4.1 Teachers Have Different Community-Building Strategies to Build Acceptance of ASD in the School and Creating a Respectful Inclusive Environment for All Students.

- 4.1.1 Teachers address bullying by working to eliminate misconceptions about ASD.
- 4.1.2 Teachers believe that in order to build acceptance of children with ASD teachers must address inclusivity as a whole through classroom discussions.

4.2 Teachers Believe That in Order to Foster an Inclusive Environment for Students, They Must First Observe Day-to-Day Interactions Between Other Students and Understand the Root of Those Interactions, Both Negative and Positive.

- 4.2.1 Teachers observed that, over time, people and students have gained a better understanding of what ASD is as a whole.
• 4.2.2 Teachers have observed that some students with ASD do not know how to interact socially with other students.

• 4.2.3 Teachers have observed that students who have not been exposed to students with special needs tend to be bullies and it can be seen or expected with older grades.

• 4.2.4 Teachers observe how lack of exposure to students with differences at a young age affects adults who have misconceptions of students with ASD today.

4.3 Teachers Build Empathy in Their Students by Using a Variety of Resources that Represent Differences and Accepting Those Differences.

• 4.3.1 Teachers have used and believe that technology-based resources promote inclusion by promoting class-wide engagement and participation.

• 4.3.2 Teachers believe that literature is a key resource that can provide students with feelings of empathy and understanding of similar real life situations.

• 4.3.3 Teachers believe that without support or outside resources it can be difficult to modify and create an inclusive environment for all students with ASD.

4.4 Teachers Believe That One of the Most Common Challenges They Face with the Inclusive Model is Having Students Understand the Difference Between Equity and Equality.

4.1 Teachers Have Different Community-Building Strategies to Build Acceptance of ASD in the School and Creating a Respectful Inclusive Environment for All Students

A common understanding amongst all three teacher participants included a strong passion for building an accepting environment in the classroom as well as in the school community. They acknowledged their belief that it is something every school should foster and devote much time towards. While there are cases of bullying being demonstrated every day, these teacher participants for the most part did not recall many bullying instances going on in the classroom,
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specifically towards students with ASD. Rather than addressing bullying specifically, they addressed how students can become more accepting and learn to advocate for each other, by building mutual respect and understanding of one another and their differences. All teacher participants highlight two main strategies. The first is to recognize that building acceptance can happen once misconceptions surrounding ASD are eliminated. The second, involves creating an accepting environment, one catered to all students, not only students with ASD, so that students with ASD do not feel singled out.

4.1.1 Teachers address bullying by working to eliminate misconceptions about ASD.

All three teacher participants indicated that the biggest misconception students, and people in general, have about students with ASD is that they may not be intelligent. Both Karen and David have heard students call another student with ASD “retarded,” which they both indicated was a complete misrepresentation of the student, or any student. Candace shared one of her first experiences learning about ASD; at a workshop someone had told her, “if you’ve met one kid with ASD, you’ve met one kid with ASD.” She addresses the fact that all children with ASD are different and you cannot simply compare one student to another. As David believes, “Just because the communication aspect may not be great, that doesn’t mean that they don’t have great ideas.” This illustrates a lack of understanding in regards to the way a student with ASD might communicate. However, it is an opportunity for students to learn about what students with ASD can do rather than focus on what they can’t do.

Teacher participants work towards understanding differences among students and how students with ASD might express themselves. One of the ways Karen does this, is by explaining to a student that everyone is different, especially if they appear to be different than other students. Karen expressed an example of a student with ASD who was obsessed with sharks. She
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explained:

I will hear other kids in the hall going “Yo, he is talking about those sharks again” as if this is odd behaviour, and I say to them “Well, you know what? He loves sharks, he knows a lot about sharks and he wants to share it. It’s his thing. Everybody has a thing, what’s your thing?” Teachers need to eliminate the misconception of what ‘normal’ is. Normal does not exist, but differences exist and are demonstrated in everyone.

As research suggests, “In schools, all young people are subject to normalisation. However, some, including those on the AS, are rendered abnormal ‘by falling outside of expected norms’ of behaviour” (Holt et al., 2012). According to the National Association of Special Education Teachers (2007), research suggests that it is important to value each other’s differences and know what students are all capable of learning (NASET, 2007). The misconception of “normalcy” is not what should be important, but rather having students understand how all students are different. Other studies propose the idea that, “pre-service teachers who have negative attitudes toward students with a disability were more likely to recommend them to a more segregated environment” (Moberg, 1997). It’s interesting to see the difference between how a negative attitude can affect a student versus a positive attitude, which Karen embodies. She believes that students can be subjects to “normalcy,” and she explains that normalcy isn’t the main goal for students with ASD, acceptance is. She expresses, “students with ASD are not your ‘typical student’ but really, what does that even mean? No one should fall under this category, because everyone is different, even the student that may be exceeding any expectations.” Karen demonstrated that she is a teacher who won’t let her students fall inside of these norms, and making sure they don’t fall into “a more segregated environment.” She is able to have meaningful discussions with them; she emphasizes, “you have to teach them that this
child has special needs, and we have a lot of students who are like this, they’re not retards.”

4.1.2 Teachers believe that in order to build acceptance of children with ASD teachers must address inclusivity as a whole through classroom discussions.

If a student is demonstrating a lack of understanding, or expressing that he/she may not understand certain behaviours that a student with ASD may have, teacher participants would address this by engaging in meaningful classroom discussions. Rather than only one individual teacher engaging in discussion, a team of educators work together in their school community to build acceptance. Candace shared the framework used in her school environment:

The teachers right now here are very good at being inclusive, and if anything comes up, any situation where there is bullying or something was said, teachers are on it right away. They use it as a learning tool and sometimes, I have heard of teachers stopping their lesson and going on tangent, talking about differences. Most teachers in this school, kind of start from the beginning of the year, and they are very careful. They don’t single out the kids with ASD, they just frame it as like, inclusivity as a whole, and acceptance as a whole. ‘So and so may learn better with visuals, so and so might learn better with computers, so and so can listen.’ We are all different learners and that’s how it’s kind of framed in this school. We use the growth mindset and that everyone learns differently, so you are not singling out the kids with ASD.

David takes a similar approach with his students; if an incident occurs in his class with a student with ASD and the student has a meltdown, he would approach the student calmly. An incident did occur where he had his student take a walk outside the classroom, and then took that moment as an opportunity to discuss with the class what just occurred. The only difference is that he does this while the student with ASD is not in the room, so that particular student does
not feel singled out and feel as if the discussion is directed at him.

Both these teacher participants address a strategy that research suggests to be a positive outcome for students with ASD as well as all students in the school community. A strategy for effective inclusion involves a whole group in a school community. By collaborating with other professionals, students and families, there is guidance and support that will benefit a student’s needs and will be at the disposal of that student’s teacher (NASET, 2007). Candace represents this idea through her school community and the assemblies held at the school that build acceptance and awareness. One way they demonstrate acceptance of ASD is through fundraisers and autism awareness month. She described one fundraiser: “the kids for the last two years, for $2 get a lollipop and write their name on a star and they put it up on the wall. Last year the entire wall was filled with stars, kids knew what it was for, their teachers take the time to teach them individually.” As a whole group and community, this school emphasizes how important it is to come together and build awareness for ASD but also build acceptance for all students.

4.2 Teachers Believe That in Order to Foster an Inclusive Environment for Students, They Must First Observe Day-to-Day Interactions Between Other Students and Understand the Root of Those Interactions, Both Negative and Positive.

All three teacher participants described that people in general have become more aware of what ASD is, as well as how to interact with students with ASD. There are however, some who may still not understand. One teacher participant illustrated how adults can fall into this category, and that is simply because they choose not to be informed, or don’t ask questions. Based on these observations of everyday experiences and interactions, teachers can determine if there are students being excluded, and establish the reason for that exclusion. In order to determine this, teachers observe how students interact with one another, but also notice how
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children with ASD interact with their peers. Some students with ASD that may not understand social cues, can have limited interactions because they may not know how to initiate interaction. This limits another student from approaching a student with ASD, because they are not sure of what reaction the student with ASD might have. Others suggest that if students are not exposed to differences at a young age, it is likely that they won’t be as empathetic, and have difficulty understanding certain behaviours. Bullying tends to occur within older grades, and normally from students who have no understanding of what ASD is.

4.2.1 Teachers observed that, over time, people and students have gained a better understanding of what ASD is as a whole.

Teacher participants have similar views in terms of how others view or understand what ASD is. Karen noted that in her school, students are used to seeing students with differences:

It’s all about exposure, it’s all about being aware. In a school where there’s no spec ed, intensive support programs or you only have learning disabilities, you don’t see it, you don’t see it on anyone. But with autism, sometimes you can see it through certain behaviours. I have a little guy that does the shaking of the hands, and that doesn’t look like a “regular” kid and “regular” behaviour, but he does it, especially when he gets excited. So these kids at the school are used to seeing that so they don’t do anything about it. They don’t make a big deal out of it.

Candace believes that even society as a whole is becoming more understanding of kids on the spectrum compared to when she was a child. She explains that no one ever taught her what autism was. She claimed that even before she became a teacher, the rates were much lower than they are now. She strongly believes there is a 100% chance of encountering someone with autism
in one’s lifetime, and that people in general are just becoming more understanding and more inclusive.

While David advocated a similar idea he also believes that it is still a learning process that students go through. He shared a story where one of his students thought the other students hated him because he was different. He addressed the class, and because of how he approached the situation, he explained, “in three years you wouldn’t even know that that child was different. Now it was a process, and what happened was the students understood, cut him some slack.” It’s not that students are not capable of understanding differences; they can and it takes time. Being exposed and being educated on these differences can change the way a student with ASD feels in a school environment.

By exposing students, as well as educating them on the attitudes they should have, these teacher participants share a similar approach to earlier research presented, where communication and open discussion is an important strategy in creating acceptance. A strategy of inclusion is based on how teachers have the ability to change students attitudes and are able to accommodate individual students, by being flexible, and constant desire to self-improve (NASET, 2007). The idea of self-improvement is evident in all cases because the knowledge students gain over time is the knowledge that will help them have a better understanding in the future. The attitude they build, and the understanding they have will teach them to be more sensitive towards students with differences.

4.2.2 Teachers have observed that some students with ASD do not know how to interact socially with other students.

Not only is it important that students interact with students with ASD, but it is also important that students with ASD interact with their peers. Sometimes, however, this isn’t
always the case. As Candace revealed in her interview, some key barriers that students with ASD have include making friends and interacting with their peers. She expressed that some students with ASD are not interested in interacting with anyone, as it is their choice, while some do want to but don’t know how to. Though any form of interaction cannot be forced, it could be problematic when it comes time for students with ASD to go into the real world and interact with others. It is difficult to include a student with ASD if they do not want to be included.

Candace’s experiences directly reflect what some studies have noted about social interactions with peers. Any aggressive or extreme behaviour often leads to isolation for the child and exclusion from a peer group (Hebron et al., 2015). So while teachers may try hard to advocate and include students, it may be difficult to do this for all students with ASD. Candace emphasized how it can be a barrier for students with ASD when other students do not know how to approach them:

If you’re in a school community that doesn’t really understand and you’re not open about the ASD population in your school, they don’t know how to react around these kids, and they kind of stay away from them. I think outside these classrooms that’s one of the key barriers they face. I think also even when they are interacting, some of our kids are non-verbal or also don’t know how to act in a social situation, so someone might say hi to them, and either they don’t answer, and not because they can’t, they just might not know the person and may feel uncomfortable. Or they might say something inappropriate and then sometimes you see that person’s reaction, just by their facial expression that they are kind of taken aback and you can see that that is going to be a barrier for these kids.

Other research demonstrates that, “Inappropriate comments or failure to understand a joke can single out the young person as ‘different’ leading to isolation and rejection (Humphrey
and Lewis, 2008). When this happens it’s understandable that students would be hesitant when approaching a student with ASD. However, students can still learn to be sensitive to these needs if they have the proper understanding. If a student is behaving a certain way, other students can learn why this is happening and understand that when they are making specific remarks or possibly saying inappropriate comments, it may not be what they actually mean to say. Social interactions can be somewhat problematic, depending on each child and their situation. There may be a student with ASD who might say inappropriate comments on a daily basis and students who have been around them long enough will understand this is normal behaviour. Or there may be a student with ASD who does not typically say anything out of the ordinary, but when he/she does, it may come as a surprise to some students. Participants suggested this is the point where teachers come in and address that some students with ASD are not always able to control how they act, or what they say. This is simply because their brain is telling them in that moment how to react to a certain situation. Whether that reaction is seen as negative or positive, it should not be taken offensively, because it may be a response to something else entirely and not specifically directed at the person they happen to be interacting with in that moment.

4.2.3 Teachers have observed that students who have not been exposed to students with special needs tend to be bullies and it can occur more with older grades.

While Karen believes that exposure over time can impact students and how they view students with ASD, or any student with differences, she also believes that it is the school’s responsibility to teach students and help them be aware of the differences in the school. She shared an example of a new student who came to the school, who had a lot of struggles with his family life, and almost immediately targeted a student with ASD, and called him a “retard.” She couldn’t blame the student because she believed he didn’t know any better. She emphasized the
fact that because he was not taught this previously and was not exposed to an individual with ASD, he hadn’t learned how to be sensitive to another student with special needs. So while the first sub-theme highlighted that there is a better understanding overall, there are still some students who need to be educated. This child who was being a bully fit Karen’s description of a bully:

The bullying is usually from someone who needs some kind of support, so you know a bully bullies because either they have been bullied or they have no self-esteem, and the only way for them to feel good about themselves is to put someone else down. That person needs attention, and we can get mad at them, but we have to remember they need attention and they often times need support as well.

Karen acknowledged that this bully may also need some extra support and be educated about acceptance, in hopes of changing this student’s view towards students with special needs. One important aspect to note, however, is participants’ belief that a teacher can’t be upset with a child if they react this way. As a teacher, Karen approached the situation from a different perspective; she looked at the root of the problem as opposed to the actual bullying itself in hopes of preventing it from happening again.

Candace, on the other hand, believes that bullying might be problematic in the future, nearing high school, which is why students should be educated at a young age, building on the idea discussed surrounding exposure. Karen acknowledged that students who have been exposed to students with ASD are more understanding of differences in general. Candace argued that because students with ASD might not understand social cues, “Kids now may not want to play with them.” Candace expressed how crucial it is that students become exposed earlier, so that they become aware and know how to manage or interact with a student with ASD, which, as
Candace expressed earlier, there is almost a “100% chance” of happening.

As stated in Chapter 2, in order to be accepting of a student with ASD, students must learn what ASD is and how it may affect some behaviours. Not knowing why a child behaves a certain way is partially why someone would distance themselves from, or even bully, a child with ASD, because they have a harder time creating friendships and interacting with others (Roekel et al., 2009). Karen and Candace have observed some instances where they believe bullying is evident and suggest that teachers can prevent this by continuously educating their students. Educating and exposing students at a young age has been beneficial for these teacher participants and may be beneficial for other teachers as well.

4.2.4 Teachers observe how lack of exposure to students with differences at a young age affects adults who have misconceptions of students with ASD today.

While Candace advocated that most people today have an overall better understanding of ASD, she also believes that older generations, such as grandparents, might not have the proper knowledge about ASD. She highlighted the fact that it is easier to educate younger children about ASD and how it affects a child, because children will process that information and constantly be exposed to it. Others, however, who have not been exposed can retain misconceptions. She gave two examples of situations that happened outside the classroom. The first was when, in a restaurant, she noticed a child with ASD having a meltdown, and overheard another person say, “well that’s how they always are, that’s how all autistic kids are.” The second occurrence was at the airport, and a child with ASD was on his iPad, “he was rocking, and doing some of the more stereotypical behaviours and people were looking at him.” She also explains how she actually loves when she can step in and explain, because she is able to educate the person and tell them:
“No, not all kids are like that, my kids can actually do this, this and this, and they integrate.” I don’t want to stereotype, but a lot of our kids, you can’t tell. You put them in an integration class and between a typically functioning kid in their class and our kids, you can’t always tell a difference you know?

Although some of these examples are not directly related to the classroom, they are very beneficial because they speak to a range of issues that can be related back to schools. If students are not at school, they can be influenced by some of these narrow minded ideas. It is crucial that students are educated by their teachers, and hopefully parents if they have the proper knowledge on the subject. This concept connects to one researcher who actually used himself as an example; he puts into perspective unrealistic expectations people had of him because they simply did not know or understand what he was going through, they just assumed he was incapable (Sinclair, 1992). Looking at a person with ASD and their perspective, these participants’ experiences demonstrate how important knowledge and understanding can be and how some people have those unrealistic biases about ASD. If they inform themselves and learn about ASD, these misconceptions may be limited.

**4.3 Teachers Build Empathy in Their Students by Using a Variety of Resources That Represent Differences and Accepting Those Differences.**

Many resources that are proven to be effective for these teacher participants include technology-based resources as well as a variety of literature. These resources have been useful to teacher participants because they are able to teach their students about empathy, and help build acceptance surrounding students with ASD, as well as many other mental or physical differences around us. Whether it is through a film, video, book, or online data-base, both students with ASD benefit as well as other students. Another vital resource is the support that teachers receive in
terms of how a student with ASD is integrated into a classroom. Whether that is through a Method’s and Resource Teacher (MART), and Educator’s Assistant (EA), Special Education Consultant, having the outside support is easier for the student to easily adapt to a new class routine, both academically and socially. In one participant’s case, this support was not always present, which will be discussed in further detail.

4.3.1 Teachers have used and believe that technology-based resources promote inclusion by promoting class-wide engagement and participation.

All three teacher participants use technology in their classrooms to better inform their students on ASD, fostering inclusion in the classroom and building an overall foundation of respect and acceptance in the classroom. David emphasized how movies can have a positive impact on his students because of the powerful messages that are expressed. He uses the movie *I am Sam* to build empathy with his students. David explained,

Sam was a great father but he faced challenges right? But, he was smart and he spoke about The Beatles and referenced almost everything. Often people refer to students with ASD as if they’re ‘retarded’ but when you watch that movie, Sam had more empathy than anyone and helped a lawyer who had studied in an Ivy League University improve her life.

David argues that you can’t judge someone because they are different. Someone can be extremely intelligent, like the lawyer who studied from an Ivy League University, and yet that person still needs help in some way. Using technology and media is an effective strategy that helps David when he wants to build empathy in his students; he indicated it allows them to see how differences can affect everyone, and it is through the lens of technology that students can come to this understanding. It is a beneficial tool in fostering inclusion in his classroom and
having meaningful discussions in terms of differences in the classroom and around them.

Another example David mentioned is teaching his students how to get along with each other through a digital resource he found:

I try to evoke a family atmosphere as best as I can. You don’t get to disrespect other people, and one thing I’ve used, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen the picture, it’s awesome, it shows the difference between equality and equity. The picture shows three children all looking over a fence. They are each trying to see over the fence and every child has the same size box under them but only the two tall children can see, and the other boy can’t see over the fence, because he is a little shorter. The picture says “equality.” Then there is another picture, same three boys, but now it shows that the taller child didn’t really need a box, so the next child gets one box, and the other beside him, who is shorter, has two, and it says “equity” and you get the idea. So we talk about that, I tell them, “I’m not treating you all the same, everyone is different.”

With this example, David demonstrates how including a media literacy resource worked effectively for him to provide an important message to students, teaching them to evaluate the overall perspective of students and understand that every student may be treated differently, because everyone’s needs are different. A student with ASD may require, in this case, an extra box to see over the fence, therefore they are given that extra box, because it is based on what they specifically need, not what everyone else has.

Karen and Candace use laptops and iPads as resources so students can participate in class lessons and discussions. For Karen, laptops are especially important for students with ASD. She reported that almost all her students with ASD would benefit from using a laptop; she claimed it keeps them focused while in the classroom. Candace described a similar effect from the use of
technology in her classroom: “Some of our kids have an iPad, and we have that because of outside partners to come in and teach us a child’s specific system.” Each student gets their own and it is adapted to their own needs.

Karen articulated how important technology is in her classroom; she stated that she relies on a lot of online websites that the board provides, as well as interactive literature. “Since it’s interactive we can read it together, they can come up and touch the screen, turn the page, tap on this, tap on that and they love it.” These resources are beneficial to all students because they are learning through interactive literature, but they are especially useful to students with ASD. Cihak et al. (2009) emphasizes how affective technology, or “video-modelling” can be for a student with ASD. He explains that:

The use of video modeling is rooted in Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory, a basic learning mechanism that has broad applicability to teaching new skills. This theory states that individuals can acquire a behavior by watching a model rather than through direct personal experience. (p. 104)

Students with ASD feel included, and can participate, in these activities. If the teacher is reading a story in the form of interactive literature, students with ASD, as well as the entire classroom feel engaged, and can focus better on a video-model, rather than a person simply speaking at the front of the room.

4.3.2 Teachers believe that literature is a key resource that can provide students with feelings of empathy and understanding of similar real life situations.

David and Candace tend to use literature to teach about inclusion in their classroom but in hard copy form. Karen discussed the importance of literature through the use of technology, but she also mentions how at her school they have a lot of literature that addresses specific cases
such as bullying, diversity, and special needs students. Not all teachers choose to use hard copy books, however, these are resources that are available to all teachers, for those who wish to utilize them.

Candace emphasized that, “there are different resources for different grades and it’s kind of on the individual teacher and how they choose to teach about it.” She mentioned it is based on the individual teacher and the needs of specific students. If there is a specific issue going on in the class or a lesson a teacher is trying to implement in the classroom, teachers can choose the literatures that are best suited for their specific goal or purpose. Similarly, Prater et al. (2006) highlights the importance of children’s literature when teaching about disabilities. They identify that the main purpose for these literatures is to teach about differences and disabilities in a general sense, to teach other content through thematic units, as well as promote awareness, and acceptance of students with disabilities (Prater et al., 2006). Prater et al (2006) confirm Candace’s same concept: “When selecting children’s literature featuring characters with learning disabilities, teachers must consider the purpose for using the book. Once teachers have determined their objectives, they must consider the portrayal of the character with learning disabilities” (p. 15). Specifically, with elementary grades, picture books tend to be beneficial resources, as illustrations help students interpret a story and students tend to respond better and identify specific issues (Prater et al, 2006). Prater et al (2006) notes:

Whereas “awareness” suggests a superficial level of knowledge about a person or issue, “understanding” suggests a deeper level of intellectual and personal involvement. After reading a well-written book, readers should have a better understanding of themselves, of others, and of social issues. (p.21)

Karen expressed a similar view on the importance of literature. If there is an issue in the
classroom, Karen believes that it is possible for literature to change a student’s perspective on specific issues. She also believes that students can be influenced by literature because it gives students a better understanding on how to be sensitive to other students with special needs. She shared a personal experience where she read a story to her class; the main idea students took away from the story was how to being caring and empathetic to their peers who need help—not specifically a student with disability, but peers in general. She explained that after she read the story, students tried to demonstrate those helpful behaviours, “It really does help, because you will see kids actually try and do things and then saying, ‘that boy was being bullied by so and so but I stepped in.’” Literature can have a positive affect on students, not only on how they treat their peers but also on the way they might view their peers with special needs.

4.3.3 **Teachers believe that without support or outside resources it can be difficult to modify and create an inclusive environment for all students with ASD.**

Both Karen and Candace claimed that there is an abundance of support for students with ASD in their schools. According to Candace, her board has many resources for students with ASD, or any other type of diagnosis, even behavioural issues. She mentioned, “speech and language pathologists that come in. We have occupational therapists; we have behavioural specialists, ABA specialists, and we have a lot of support in those terms.” To the same extent Karen also emphasized how she offers the support in her school as the MART; most teachers come to her if they need extra support with a student. She also named a few other important resource consultants and supports available, “social worker, psychologist, speech and language pathologist and they are always available to me. They come to the school with the team once a month so we can really get into a student with detail to help support.” According to Karen if there is need for outside resources, they will make sure to have a meeting and address any issues,
or possible solutions necessary for a specific child with ASD. Similarly, David stated that resources and support are what help students with ASD learn better and integrate easily in a classroom. According to David, however, when asked if there was enough support for his students, he expressed:

Absolutely not. And the worst part is, boards of education say it’s about students and it’s not, it’s about money. So there is talk about reducing special ed support and if you have a teacher who at least understands and can make it work, that’s one thing. If you just plunk a student in a class with a teacher who doesn’t know how to handle it and isn’t preparing the students, it will be a disaster. And they can’t just do that to students. Honestly if I didn’t have the experiences I’ve had, we would have been in the news, something serious would have happened. Either with that particular student with paranoia doing something to another student or vice versa. And they eventually got support for me in June. I had the student since September. That’s not right. And the type of support needed would be, if you just had an adult who understands and could become that students kind of “go-to person” in the room. I don’t mind them in the classroom, but in that case it would benefit the student to have that person. It shouldn’t be about money and trying to do things cheaper; that’s inexcusable.

Here, there is a distinct contrast in the claims of a classroom teacher, a MART and a community class teacher, in that their perspectives are completely contradictory to one another. They are all educators, yet one claimed that there is no support, and if there is support, it given too late when the school year has ended. Whether or not there is support, from what David expressed, if a teacher is not well prepared then the student with ASD in their class will struggle and not be integrated as smoothly as one would hope into the classroom. This will have an negative affect
on the student in terms of their academics and social progression, if no one is addressing the students needs.

4.4 Teachers Believe That One of the Most Common Challenges They Face with the Inclusive Model is Having Students Understand the Difference Between Equity and Equality

While David has a model to better understand equity vs. equality, he as well as Candace and Karen share similar challenges. All three participants’ main struggles revolve around other students in their classroom asking them questions about why they are choosing to give a specific student a paper, activity, or assignment “different” from their own. While the answer to this may be evident to some educators, for children it may not be something easy for them to grasp. They have this common understanding that everyone gets the same things in school, and that is ultimately what is “fair.” Contrary to this however, all three participants emphasize the importance of giving each student, not only those with ASD, what they need in order to be successful, and not what everyone else is receiving. While there may be some challenges there are some ways these teachers try to overcome these particular challenges.

David identified his challenge to be, “The whole notion that treating everyone exactly the same, is not being fair” in the eyes of his students. One strategy he uses to address this situation is by giving students examples of what is fair vs. what is needed. He uses the “equality vs. equity” poster often and to engage in discussion with his students. The poster illustrates the difference between equality and equity. There are three children all looking over a fence. Each child has a box underneath to help them see over the fence. One student is shorter than the other two and still cannot see over the fence. This is described as “equality.” Then there is another picture below, same three boys, but now it shows that the taller child didn’t really need a box, so
the next child gets one box, and the other beside him, who is shorter, has two, and it says “equity.” The examples he uses are real life situations, in which students need specific materials or tools to help them either learn or adapt better to a school environment. He tells his students that he would not yell at someone who was blind because he is using additional equipment to read. According to David, when examples are simplified for them, students have a better understanding that not everyone always gets the same things. David stated:

To some level students understand that some people need other things. If I am physically disabled and I have a wheelchair, that doesn’t mean that every other student should get a wheelchair to roll around in. It’s not a fun thing. So I mean, concepts like that, they do understand.

Similarly, Candace’s strategies relate to David’s; she gives her students examples as well, so that they understand the different uses for different materials and how they help certain students. She would demonstrate to her students, “Well you need glasses to see, he needs the iPad to communicate, or sit calmly, it helps him when the lights are out, head phones help because it gets too loud for him.”

While Karen takes on the same strategy, she adds a different approach. She doesn’t focus so much on the students’ understanding of why, because she believes they may not fully grasp the reason why. Karen focuses more on the reason why she is modifying her assessment as opposed to thinking about what another student might think. She is the one who needs to see how a student is progressing, or what they may need more support with. She reported on an incident that recently occurred:

I had a student say to me, “How come he doesn’t have to write the math test?” And it wasn’t that I didn’t want the student to write the math test, it just so happened that this
student wasn’t able to express his thoughts on paper as clearly as he could articulate them. So instead for that specific student, I assessed him orally rather than having him sit and write a test. It can be difficult and sometimes other students believe that I’m giving certain students easier work, when really that’s not the case. I know the student’s strengths and I want them to be successful, so I will try my best to accommodate them the best way I know how.

According to Bertrand et al. (2002), “Most children can master the same content; how they master it is determined by their individual styles” (p.88). With Karen’s goal in mind she can educate her students on why she does what she does. Not all students will understand her methods of assessment; perhaps they won’t until they are older. Karen focuses mainly on the individual student and what they need. All children have different learning styles, and a lot of children require specific modifications suited to their needs. Research suggests that many students in Grades 3-8 are known to learn better when in smaller groups, rather than one on one with a teacher or alone, excluding children with ASD and gifted students who may require different methods (Bertrand et al., 2002). Within smaller group structures, children are free to move around, and use “multisensory interactions” (Bertrand et al., 2002). The classroom teacher is the best person to make those judgments and see which ways students in the class learn better. Teachers can educate their students so they understand that there are different learning styles in every classroom, with every student, and there are specific students who benefit from working individually with a teacher rather than with a group.

4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the data found that these participants had many similar strategies when fostering inclusion in the classroom for students with ASD. These strategies are built from a
combination of personal growth, learnings and overall experience with students with ASD. In order to build an inclusive and respectful classroom environment, teachers engage in meaningful discussions with their students. This works towards eliminating any misconceptions surrounding ASD, while building understanding of what it is, and how to accept a student despite their diagnosis. Through various observations, teachers have noted that there are several interactions students with ASD have with their peers, both positive and negative. Overall, students do have a better understanding of what ASD is, in respect to past generations; society today appears to be becoming more open-minded and more accepting of differences because there is more exposure in schools today. Those with less exposure to students with ASD have less understanding of what ASD is and can demonstrate bullying behaviour as a result. While encouraging students to be advocates and teaching them to be accepting of all students, this can become a challenge for some students with ASD that struggle with social interactions.

Even so, there are a variety of methods and strategies teachers could use to help students understand students with ASD. Teachers believe that literature and technology are key resources that can provide students empathy and promoting inclusion. These resources also allow students with ASD to feel included and feel as though they are actively participating in the classroom. However, without outside resources for teachers or support to teach these understandings, a student with ASD’s personal growth and development could be at risk. This is why it is up to the teacher of these students to educate and balance the struggles they have, with a positive attitude. The teacher participants involved with the research study provided some of their own struggles as well as many successful strategies they use in the classroom. Some of the ideas mentioned can add to existing research and provide support for other teachers.

Overall, the literature addresses some key points that the teacher participants made. With
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a positive attitude, teachers can teach their students how to be accepting of students with ASD while also understanding some of their behaviours and needs in comparison to others. Once teachers become aware of various strategies, they can begin to promote inclusion in the classroom and foster a respectful and accepting learning environment for students with ASD as well as all future students.

CHAPTER 5 – IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the implications of my research study. I begin by reviewing some of the key findings on how elementary school teachers foster inclusion in the classroom for students with ASD. Then, I discuss the implications of the findings, in terms of how it can reflect the educational community as well as my own professional identity and practice as a teacher. I include recommendations for other teachers, educational professionals, as well as beginner teachers who are not as familiar with students with ASD. Next, I identify areas of further research. Finally, I conclude by speaking to the significance of my research and pose questions that would suggest further research on my topic and generate discussion.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

As discussed in the previous chapter, strategies for fostering inclusion in the classroom are adapted according to a teacher’s own personal growth, learnings and overall experience with students with ASD. The most important way teachers can foster inclusion in the classroom is for teachers to engage in deep discussion about ASD; this includes what ASD is, how it can affect a student, and how to engage or interact with that student.

The teacher participants identified their beliefs, along with their own personal experiences and included strategies they have used in classrooms to foster an inclusive
environment for students with ASD. Teachers have different community-building strategies to build acceptance of ASD in their school and create a respectful inclusive environment for all students. They come together as a school community during assemblies to address bullying, and eliminate any misconceptions about ASD, and raise awareness. In order to further build acceptance of children with ASD teachers can help students understand through classroom discussions.

Through daily student and peer interactions, these participants have been able to understand the meaning behind those interactions and observe how students with ASD are being treated. Through various interactions and different observations, some participants have observed that people and students over time have a better understanding of what ASD is, and students demonstrate this understanding by being supportive, not disrupting their peer with ASD, giving them their space (when needed), and being kind and respectful. However, teachers have also observed over time that certain students who have not been exposed to students with differences, may be less inclined to understand, and therefore bully them because they see these differences as a form of weakness.

One of the main goals for fostering inclusion in the classroom is making sure teachers are building empathy in their students, and they do this by using a variety of resources that represent differences and accepting those differences. Some helpful resources include, technology, various forms of literatures, as well as outside resources by fellow co-workers, support teams, such as MART’S, special needs specialists and professional interventionists.

Through my findings, I have concluded that there are many useful and effective strategies teachers can build upon and incorporate in their own classroom. These strategies are significant because they address many misconceptions of ASD. They address ways in which teachers can
prevent bullying in the classroom by discovering the root of the bullying and why it might be occurring. Lastly, they also address ways in which teachers can build empathy in students and ensure an accepting learning environment for all students.

### 5.2 Implications

In this section, I outline the implications for both active members in the educational field, including teachers, school social workers, counselors, and other educational professionals. I also outline some of the implications that pertain to my own professional identity and practice as a beginning teacher.

#### 5.2.1 The education community

The broader education community should know that ASD is a reality that students deal with every day; as Candace explained, “there is a 100% chance of encountering someone with autism in your lifetime.” ASD is a part of life and affects children and their social interactions with their peers. While students with ASD are not forced to interact with students, there are helpful strategies that allow students with ASD to feel comfortable in a classroom setting and feel included by each and every individual in the classroom. It is important to remember the main reason for having students together in a classroom. A classroom setting with students of various needs is meant to normalize everyone, and make everyone feel included. A classroom environment is not meant to exclude students who may be different, but to include them. Everyone is in the same learning environment because they are all there for the same purpose, to learn. It is also important for administrators and principals to have a role in sustaining a whole school environment that is accepting of all differences. What goes on in each classroom, is mostly the individual teachers responsibility and initiative, however the whole school environment and beliefs is a reflection on administrators. As long as all members within the
educational community are consistent in advocating for and accepting of all differences, students in the school community will feel a sense of inclusion and presence.

5.2.2. My professional identity and practice

As an emerging researcher I believe inclusion is important in any classroom setting with every student, regardless of their diagnosis. As a future teacher, and as someone who has not worked with many students with special needs, I believe it is important to learn some useful, as well as successful strategies when trying to foster inclusion in the classroom. After conducting a qualitative research study on how teachers foster inclusion in the classroom for students with ASD, I have a better understanding of how to create a more accepting and inclusive classroom environment for all students.

After hearing different perspectives on how to foster inclusion in the classroom, I am optimistic and confident in my knowledge to implicate some of the strategies my participants have used with their students, and transfer that knowledge in my own classroom. It is important that a teacher is confident in their abilities and brings a positive attitude into a classroom environment. From the few teaching experiences I have had, I have come to the understanding that it is not an easy task working with students with ASD. However, I don’t see this as any form of discouragement; if anything it is a learning process and a growth mindset. It is a mindset that I don’t believe anyone can fully master, but can attempt to do their best, in order for students to have a successful and positive learning experience.

As a future teacher I will strive for successful and positive relationships for all my students, and make sure they feel accepted both in my classroom and in the school. I will do my best to educate them on the importance of acceptance and equality, as well as why it is important everyone is included even if they may share differences, physically, mentally, emotionally, or
academically. It is important that my students acknowledge these differences, embrace them and treat everyone with respect.

5.3 Recommendations

In order for inclusion to be fostered in every classroom, teachers, as well as other members of the educational community, such as counselors, school social workers, and principals, need to have the proper mentality and positive mindset to ensure that their current and future students with ASD feel accepted. I do believe that every teacher gains more knowledge with each passing year with every student they have. I believe that all teacher candidates, including myself, should have more experience with students with ASD in order to implement certain practices in the classroom. I think it is essential that beginner teachers have the opportunity to learn about students with ASD as well as work with students with ASD, to better understand how they can adapt a classroom to fit their needs. If teacher candidates take additional qualifications to learn more about Special Education in general, they can apply that knowledge when finding themselves placed in a classroom where there are students with special needs. Perhaps teacher candidates can volunteer their time or ask to be placed in a classroom where there are a range of differences. Gaining more hands on experience as well as observing how classroom teachers create inclusive environments, can help future teachers when they have their own classroom one day.

All teachers, even ones with considerable experience should be open to and optimistic when teaching a student with ASD. Some students with ASD require a lot of patience and support. It is a teacher’s responsibility to understand all her students and their needs, specifically how they understand and how they interact with one another. Based on the research conducted through teacher participants, as well as helpful strategies discussed in Chapter 2, teachers and
other educational professionals such as principals and administrators, should consider the following four strategies: According to the National Association of Special Education Teachers (2007), the first strategy for effective inclusion can improve the educational system by placing students together in a classroom with different, “learning ability, race, linguistic ability, economic status, gender, learning style, ethnicity, cultural background, religion, family structure, and sexual orientation” (p. 2). Those responsible for making class lists each year include teachers, counselors and school social workers; they can work together to keep these differences in mind and arrange students accordingly. The second involves being sensitive to accepting other students and their differences, and this strategy is meant for the classroom teacher, not necessarily giving students accountability of what they are able to do but value each others differences and know that they are all capable of learning (NASET, 2007). The third strategy of inclusion is based on how teachers have the ability to change their attitudes and are able to accommodate individual students, by being flexible, and be motivated to constantly self-improve (NASET, 2007). The fourth strategy involves a whole group in a school community, collaboration with other professionals, students and families. Constant guidance and support will benefit each student and their needs (NASET, 2007).

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Research regarding ASD is very extensive and easily accessible, however finding research on how to build positive relationships with students with ASD is somewhat limited. Some areas for further research could include more elaborate, long-term strategies on how to develop positive relationships in the classroom with students with ASD. Through my research I have discovered some meaningful and useful strategies teachers can include in the classroom to ensure that students with ASD feel included, however, I think further research on building
relationships could also benefit from discussion. There are a few remaining questions I have in regards to student interactions with ASD that could be further developed and researched:

What happens if a student with ASD refuses to interact with peers and does not want to be included? Should they be excluded if that will make them happy? Is it possible to see how strategies work overtime with a specific student? Is it possible to track both the strengths and limitations of these strategies? Can a study be conducted to develop strategies catered to a specific child on the autism spectrum and their individual needs?

I think the extent of the research can progress further when considering the needs of an individual child with ASD and discovering what each child may benefit from, as opposed to all students with ASD. Although I believe inclusion is important for all students, I think it is important to create strategies and objectives toward each individual and their specific needs.

5.5 Concluding Comments

ASD is a neurological condition that needs to be understood on a wider and more extensive level. This research carries an impact for students, teachers, as well as adults and family members that know someone with ASD or have worked with a student with ASD. In this chapter I have included an overview of my findings and its significance to my study, as well as some of the implications for both active members in the educational field, including teachers, school social workers, counselors, administrators and educational professionals. I have addressed some of the useful strategies suggested by researchers, and implemented by teacher participants. I have included ways in which I can bring my knowledge and understanding of the topic in my own classroom, and how I can implement some strategies of my own with a positive attitude and mindset. I have also mentioned some recommendations that would be beneficial for teachers as well as other members of the education community. Lastly, I have added some additional
insights and questions that could be further developed concerning my topic.

My over-arching goal for this research study is to acknowledge ASD, and how prominent it is in schools and in society in general. As a teacher I wanted to learn how teachers foster inclusion for students with ASD, and how they educate other students on what ASD is and how it can affect an individual. I have seen a student with ASD become a victim to bullying and wanted to know how teachers would approach this situation in the classroom, and if it is a recurring theme in their own classrooms. Through my research, I have come the understanding that bullying is a common occurrence with students with ASD, because students lack knowledge or understanding of these individuals, thereby misinterpreting their social cues. However, as teacher participants have noted, at some schools bullying is not as predominant because there is the notion of acceptance in their school community and a common understanding of differences. Teachers who engage in discussion with their students about ASD can create an inclusive classroom and school environment. By promoting acceptance, equality and respect for all students, they are promoting inclusion within their school community. Overall, I feel that this study has provided deep and significant insight on the ways in which teachers can foster inclusion in the classroom, and can continue to progress and foster an accepting learning environment for students with ASD.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A – Letter of Consent

Date:

Dear _______________________________,

My Name is Sabrina Puopolo and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on inclusion in the classroom for children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Specifically, how teachers create opportunities for their students to understand autism, and how they approach bullying in the classroom, so that they can foster an inclusive classroom environment for all students. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have worked with children with ASD and with a minimum of 5 years of experience working in a classroom with special needs children. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor, Dr. Angela MacDonald. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Sabrina Puopolo
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Sabrina Puopolo and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) ______________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B – Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn how teachers create opportunities for their students to understand autism, and how they approach bullying in the classroom, so that they can foster an inclusive classroom environment for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on how to foster inclusion in the classroom for children with ASD. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To begin can you state your name for the recording?

Section A: Background Information

1. How long have you been a teacher?

2. What is your current position?
   a. What grades and subject areas do you currently teach?
   b. Which have you taught previously?
   c. Do you fulfill any other roles in the school? (e.g. leader, advisor, resource support etc.)

3. Can you tell me more about the school you teach in? (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities)
   a. Does your school offer special education support? What resources are available for spec ed support in your school?
   b. Approximately what percentage of the students in your school has been diagnosed as having special needs?
   c. Do you have a sense of the prevalence of autism amongst your students?
   d. Do you currently have any students with ASD in your class?

4. How long have you been working with children with ASD?

5. Have you worked with other children with special needs?

6. What experiences have contributed to developing your interest and preparation for supporting students with ASD? (*probe re: personal, educational, professional experiences)
Section B: Teacher Perspective/Beliefs

1. How do you define autism (ASD)? What does it mean to you? What are some key characteristics that you associate with ASD?

2. In your experience, what are some of the most common misunderstandings people have about ASD?

3. In your view, what are some of the key barriers and challenges that students with ASD confront in schools?

4. In your view, how well do schools do in addressing those barriers?

5. In your view, what are some of the strengths and limitations of the inclusive classroom model?
   a. Do you believe that students with ASD benefit from larger classroom settings? If yes, in what way? If no, why not?
   b. Do you believe that students with ASD benefit from more individualized support? If yes, in what way? If no, why not?

6. To what extent have you observed students with ASD being bullied in your classroom or school?

7. In your experience, why are students with ASD bullied?

Section C: Teacher Practices

8. How do you teach your students about ASD?
   a. Are there particular resources that you like to use?
   b. What curriculum do you connect this work to?
   c. What are your learning goals?
   d. How do your students respond? What outcomes do you observe from them?
   e. How, if at all, do you assess their understanding of ASD?

9. How, if at all, do you develop your students’ understanding of ASD when there is a student with ASD in your classroom?

10. How do your students respond? What outcomes of learning do you observe from them?
    *listen, and then probe re: inclusion, mutual respect, care, friendship, patience, compassion

11. What role, if any, does collaboration with parents play in your work teaching about and supporting the inclusion of students with ASD?
12. How have you addressed the topic of bullying in relation to the work you do with students developing their understanding of autism?
   a. What are some ways you work to prevent bullying of students with ASD?
   b. And what about in response to bullying? Do you approach the situation the same way you would any other bullying situation? Why / why not?

13. How do your students respond to the work you do on bullying in relation to autism? What outcomes have you observed?

14. What resources support you in teaching students about bullying in relation to ASD? (e.g. books, websites, music, videos, curriculum materials)

**Section D: Supports and Challenges**

1. Do you find that there is a lot of support in your school for students with ASD?

2. What range of factors and resources support you in this work? (e.g. school climate, leadership, collaboration with colleagues, access to support workers, parent communication etc.)

3. What are some of the challenges that you encounter when developing students’ understanding of ASD?
   a. How do you respond to these challenges?
   b. What range of supports would further assist you in meeting these challenges?

**Section E: Next Steps**

1. What advice would you give a new teacher who is committed to developing students’ understanding of ASD and supporting the inclusion of students with ASD?

2. What would you say is the most important thing you have learned over the years about inclusiveness in the classroom?

Thank you for your participation.